

Philadelphia School District Deconstruction – A Case Requiring Consideration

James H. Lytle

For almost 30 years I was a principal and central office administrator in the School District of Philadelphia. I've lived in Philadelphia for more than 40 years. After leaving the Philadelphia schools I went on to Trenton, NJ, to be superintendent for eight years, then came back to Philadelphia to teach educational leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. My heart and my commitment to improving urban public schools have always been centered in Philadelphia.

I came here in 1970 to be part of what was then the most significant urban school reform effort in the country. Mark Shedd was the pacesetter superintendent and former mayor, Richardson Dilworth, led a school board committed to experimentation. The recently authorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided substantial “alternative program” funding.

Since then I've seen the School District go through all sorts of transformations, from patronage mill to instrument for desegregation. For the past 20 years I've observed a succession of superintendent “saviors” imported from other parts of the U.S. come to Philadelphia with the latest recipe for salvation. And now I am watching the sell-off of what remains of the District to charter school and for-profit hustlers who claim to have discovered the grail of urban school improvement.

Last Spring the District was caught-up in a contentious battle over proposed school closings, but that battle diverted energy from the larger question – is Philadelphia headed in a direction that makes sense, one that will ensure that children are better served than they have been?

Philadelphia is operating in a federal policy environment that dates back to the Clinton and then Bush administrations. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed by Congress in 2001, stipulated performance standards for all public schools and a set of sanctions for those that did not meet the standards. The sanctions include closing low-performing schools, converting them to charter schools, or turning them over to for-profit or not-for-profit management companies. Performance targets are raised every two years, making it increasingly difficult for inner-city schools serving disadvantaged students to make “adequate yearly progress,” and setting the stage for “mandated” intervention.

The Obama administration, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, have been strong supporters of these market-based approaches to school reform, and have worked closely with major foundations, including Gates, Walton and Broad, to push this agenda. Charter schools continue to have bi-partisan support at the federal and state levels.

Coincidentally, 2001 was also the year the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took control of the School District of Philadelphia, disbanded the school board, and created the School Reform Commission (SRC), a majority of whose members are appointed by the governor. The new SRC was immediately authorized through NCLB with the power to take-over or close schools, and to authorize charter schools, as it saw fit. At intervals since 2001 the U.S. Department of Education has provided Pennsylvania and Philadelphia substantial funding for improving low-performing schools, most recently through Race-to-the-Top grants. These funds can be spent to support charter schools and other forms of intervention as state departments of education determine.

This brief account of the policy environment provides the context in which the SRC is acting, and helps explain how it has been able to move a “reform” agenda that in many respects mirrors NCLB and Race to the Top policies. In the past year the School Reform Commission has agreed to:

- Expand charter school enrollment – from 55,000/200,000 (in 2012-13) to 80,000/200,000 (in 2014-15) – which will require transferring additional and proportionate funds from the district to charters.
- Borrow \$300,000,000 for operating expenses, thus ensuring a level of debt service that further erodes the district's ability to maintain itself.
- Close as many as 60 district schools over a two-year period (most of those with high proportions of African-American students; many in areas where real estate play is a factor), and at the same time, continue to convert “low-performing” schools to charters. (The cyclical effect of increased charter enrollments will, of course, be more district school closings.)
- Privatize Head Start (i.e., eliminate the unionized teacher requirement).

- Renege on principal salary increases agreed to only months before, and on the school security officer contract.
- Use corporate consultants to develop a strategic plan (the Boston Consulting Group).
- Support a city-wide organization, the Philadelphia School Partnership, as the “reform leader” in the city, ostensibly to coordinate and improve schooling across public, charter, and archdiocesan schools. (To date a substantial majority of its investments have been in charter schools.)
- Appoint a superintendent from out of state who agrees to support the SRC’s agenda and a deputy superintendent whose prior experience has been with McKinsey, another corporate consultancy (and never as a school leader).
- Negotiate a teacher contract which would dramatically change wages and working conditions for teachers – impose a 15% salary cut, reduce benefits, eliminate seniority provisions and transfer rules, and increase class size.
- Adopt an FY 2014 budget that required laying off 3,700 employees including all assistant principals, counselors and school secretaries, and 675 teachers. (As additional funds become available, some positions will be restored.)

The School Reform Commission and new superintendent have:

- Put forward a strategic plan that makes balancing the budget its first priority and lists so many strategies and actions that it provides no clear direction (best considered as a political document lacking any compelling vision).
- Claimed that a decimated central office and schools with only basic staffing and a high proportion of inexperienced principals and teachers have the capacity to implement the plan, whether the instruction or operating components.
- Talked about improved school climate while at the same time reducing nursing, counselor, support teacher and support staff positions.
- Sat on millions of dollars in categorical funds that must be used for professional development (Titles I and II, Race to the Top).
- Set the stage for a brutal teacher contract negotiation in August 2013 which may well precipitate a strike. [By state statute the SRC is authorized to decertify the union and impose whatever compensation and working conditions it chooses.]

Meanwhile the mayor, city council, the governor, and the state legislature dicker around possible tax increases which in total would make only a small dent in the district’s deficit.

Their collective actions and impending actions build from implicit and explicit assumptions of urban school “badness” promoted in local and national media – violent schools, poor academic achievement, disengaged families, badly managed organizations, ineffective teachers, over-paid administrators, test cheating, lack of accountability, etc. Conveniently, these constructions provide contrast with the ostensible advantages of charter schools and vouchers, setting up neo-liberal, privatize solutions.

The large and looming question behind the drive for charters in Philadelphia and nationally is ‘who will profit from this shift in school provision?’ Is Philadelphia the next domino in the New Orleans, Detroit, and Cleveland school district demolition movement? Why is it that Gates/Microsoft and Walton/Walmart are proponents of charters, portfolio management, and market-based approaches? Why is it that rich white folks are leading the conversation about what poor black and Latino kids need? Why is so much campaign money being used to support charter and voucher proponents? Where is the evidence that charter schools do a better job than traditional public schools? And what does Boston Consulting Group know about urban schooling that School District teachers and principals don’t?

These are all big questions, and there are no clear answers. But a reasonable notion would be to follow the money. The federal government is subsidizing charter expansion, as are major foundations. Charter schools offer the potential for low-risk, high gain returns; already 60% of charter students in the U.S. are at schools operated by for-profit corporations. And a number of national charter school management companies are working to meet demand - think McDonalds or Walmart as models for national systems of schools with predictable products and quality, low-cost, and standardized educational programs.

In another respect, the democratizing function of public schools is being superseded by consumer-driven, choice and market approaches that favor those who know how markets works. We are in the midst of a hostile takeover where the controlling party profits from capturing the assets of the acquired entity. But in this case it is a public enterprise that is being deconstructed and sold-off with no demonstrable benefit to the shareholders, the children and families and community whose fates are determined by the quality of their local public schools.

Are there plausible alternatives? Are there scenarios in which strong public schools survive and prosper?

We need to begin by agreeing that preserving schools which have been marginally effective and reify the demarcations of race and class is not be an adequate solution. Nor is tinkering with the pieces and parts of schools, or thrusting them into the market.

In my view the only meaningful option is to acknowledge that it is in our common interest to make equity and quality the cornerstones for educational reform. That can only happen if parents, students, and teachers band together to wrest control from the elites who are driving federal and state policy, and insist on schools they directly control. That in turn will require a social movement – Occupy Our

Schools. – which has as its goal the reinvention of schooling as engaging, demanding, responsive, accessible, timely, future-oriented.

The Chicago teacher strike in September 2012 may be a bellwether for an Occupy movement because a coalition of teachers and parents backed down Mayor Rahm Emmanuel and the city's Business Roundtable in forcing a resolution that built from the best interests of kids.

Philadelphia is the next major test, and the prospects here are not encouraging.

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James H. Lytle ("Torch") is Adjunct Practice Professor of Educational Leadership at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. From 1998-2006 he was superintendent of the Trenton, NJ, Public Schools, and from 1970-1998 he served in a variety of capacities in the School District of Philadelphia, including principal, executive director for research, regional superintendent, and assistant superintendent.

Lytle has been active in a number of national professional organizations, including the Council of Great City Schools and the American Educational Research Association. His teaching and research interests relate to the efficacy of urban public schools, leadership transitions, and school change.

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